



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code: 2021/98/17

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

Accession Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

SECRET

Copy
for Information

SECRET

***Government meeting with SDLP
held in Government Buildings
Wednesday, 4 September, 1996 at 11.00 a.m.***

ATTENDANCE

SDLP

John Hume
Seamus Mallon
Dr. Joe Hendron
Brid Rodgers
Eddie McGrady

Government

Taoiseach
Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs
Proinsias de Rossa, Minister for Social Welfare

Officials

Paddy Teahon, Secretary, Department of the Taoiseach
Sean Ó hUiginn, Second Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs,
Wally Kirwan, Department of the Taoiseach
Sean Donlon - Taoiseach's Special Advisor
Dr. Albert Jordan, Department of the Taoiseach

The **Taoiseach** welcomed the SDLP and asked them for their assessment of the impact of the summer's events on the talks and where the talks could now lead? What might be expected from the British Government? The Taoiseach said that it would be important to create a focus for movement - the talks were the only show in town (even with all of their defects). He asked whether the SDLP could suggest some practical measures which might be taken, whether parallel to or within the talks, for example in the areas in the parity of esteem, changes in policing or fair employment and for the SDLP's assessment of the prospects to make progress.

John **Hume** said this has been one of the worst summers ever. He said that the North was, however, used to increased tensions during the marching season and he had hoped that they would now cool down a bit. The current tension if anything strengthens the need for agreement to be reached and for the talks to succeed. It was a task for all to get that message across. He said that it would be important that the British Government make sure that the talks are "for real" and that they focus on the three relationships. He was reasonably hopeful that there will be a new ceasefire which would strengthen the political element.

Seamus **Mallon** said that next week was important and if progress was not made quickly we are going to end up back in the morass.

Brid **Rodgers** said she was away for August. She had thought that the high feelings of July, post Drumcree, might have abated. The reverse, if anything, was the case. She said she had never seen such a sea change in Nationalists thinking and mood. Moderate people had totally changed in their view of things. Her analysis was that people were forming the view that the SDLP and the political people had tried very hard but that their efforts were not going to produce results, Nationalists would remain second class citizens whenever Unionists use their muscle. She did not know what to do. She said that she almost wished that the SDLP were sitting out there with Sinn Féin with an excuse not to go into the talks. People, she said, had lost hope of a breakthrough or of the British Government doing anything. She had never seen such a strength of feeling.

The **Tánaiste** said we should consider what action we need to take in conjunction with the British Government. Another question he said was what the SDLP and others could do vis-à-vis the Unionists. He said there would probably not be any conclusions before a British General Election but a lot of work could be done during that period and we did need to look at what could be done. He asked if David Trimble was prepared to start serious politics.

John **Hume** said that the SDLP were planning to have a meeting with the Unionists before the end of the week.

Eddie **McGrady** said that the backlash on the Unionists was increasing. There has been a lot of editorial criticism too. He said that it was imperative for Trimble to regain some credibility and to establish a reasonable image. He did say though that it (meeting) may be more of a cosmetic exercise (on Trimble's part) than a realistic attempt to make progress.

Joe **Hendron** said that there appears to be almost a sympathy even amongst middle class Catholics with Sinn Féin. He said that at the time of Drumcree the road blocks and the RUC failure to deal with them had almost been as significant as the violence itself. Even in small places where only one or two thugs were manning the roadblocks, police took no any action of any kind. He said - regarding the RUC - that it was now difficult for the SDLP to say "support the police" at any level. He didn't think that Mayhew or the British Government appreciated how serious it is. A lot of work needs to be done and the two Governments would need to be central to that.

The **Taoiseach** said that the Unionists would not be meeting the Irish Government on this occasion. However he had spoken to David Trimble by phone last week. Mr. Trimble said that he would be seeking a meeting with the SDLP. The Taoiseach said that if he is to be believed he does want to do some serious business. He said his (Taoiseach's) analysis of Trimble was that he did not seem to be confident about the talks format but that he (Trimble) appeared to see some prospect of doing business with the SDLP outside the talks, that could then be ratified in the talks. He also had some views on getting agreement on decommissioning. The Taoiseach questioned on whether these would be realistic though he did suspect that it was more that a cosmetic exercise.

John **Hume** said that Trimble has frequently in the past appeared to make positive overtures, only to negate these by his subsequent behaviour. He is a very hard man to deal with.

Seamus **Mallon** said if Trimble wished to be positive he had the capacity to agree the opening agenda especially on the question of decommissioning and where it would be on the order of business and also how it should be handled. Those were two questions that the SDLP would be putting to him. Mr. Mallon pointed out that David Trimble had gone back on every single thing they had agreed with him previously. "That is the difficulty with him".

John **Hume** said that he was to contact David Trimble tomorrow morning.

The **Tánaiste** said it would be important to put it to Trimble that if he wants to show good intent now is the opportunity.

Proinsias **de Rossa** wondered if it would be useful to publicly signal the SDLP's purpose in meeting Mr. Trimble.

It was Eddie **McGrady's** view that things had to be up front and that if Unionists had a reasonable proposition it should be put on the table.

The **Tánaiste** said that if Trimble's party have no willingness we would find things very protracted if after a week or two things started to get very nasty i.e. by the end of September people would be looking for something from the talks.

Joe **Hendron** said that Peter Robinson had been talking about a lack of sincerity on behalf of the SDLP and the Irish Government.

The **Taoiseach** asked John Hume for his assessment of the likelihood of an IRA **ceasefire**.

John **Hume** said that he knew they were working on it. His "guess" - no more than that - was it was highly likely.

Bríd **Rodgers** said that if she was Sinn Féin she would continue the *de facto* ceasefire but not call it officially, maintaining the martyrdom of being kept out of the talks. She said that she reckoned that Sinn Féin would see it in their political interest not to call a ceasefire. The Taoiseach asked whether the context of an American Election might influence them.

John **Hume** commented that the mood on the ground was powerfully anti-violence.

The **Taoiseach** said that Adare and Manchester made no sense yet had happened.

Bríd **Rodgers** accepted that the IRA might not go back to violence in Northern Ireland, but may have too much to lose by announcing a formal ceasefire.

Seamus **Mallon** asked what was the difference between a ceasefire officially announced and the current status quo at the moment. He commented that Sinn Féin/IRA had taken from everyone but they Sinn Féin have given nothing and they continue to do that. He said that

their reasoning was that they were not in the talks because they did not want an agreement at this stage. If they wanted "in" to the talks, they would find a way in. He said that it was now time to put it to the Unionists that an agreement needed to be reached.

He said that residents associations were in effect the local Provo unit riding on the crest of ugly **sectarian populism**. Seamus Mallon said that they were no longer killing people, but they were very steadily killing the capacity in the nationalist communities to reach an agreement. Unless that situation could be brought home to the Unionists and there was some movement the talks would be for optical purposes only.

The political process must take the initiative. On the ground there was a blunting of the capacity for agreement. He said that it was as serious as violence. He did not think the IRA would do anything for Clinton - "those bastards do nothing for anybody". They have to be part of it or they will break it. The body politic in the North could not take another see-saw as to whether there would be a ceasefire or not. He said the next few weeks would be crucial.

The **Taoiseach** said he agreed very much with what Mr. Mallon had just said. He said it was important that the Governments create a sense that something is happening in the talks for Sinn Féin to want to opt into them. He said that it was important to point out clearly to the Unionists the dangers. They and the SDLP must seize the initiative early in these talks.

Joe **Hendron** said that in west Belfast '**community control**' is operating in all the big housing estates. He commented on an article in Saturday mornings Irish News on the Divis Towers. The IRA/ Sinn Féin was a fascist organisation, and he gave a number of incidents, where fear or worse compelled victims not to take matters any further. He did not think that they wanted in to the talks.

Seamus **Mallon** said that the SDLP should be able to come out of a meeting with the Unionists and say that there was an agenda agreed, that decommissioning would be post talks and that Unionists agreed that it was unrealistic to let it stand in the way of what would otherwise be possible. They could then get immediately into substantive negotiations. He said they should be talking about something in the region of the Framework Document. When that was on the table Sinn Féin could not afford to be outside.

The **Taoiseach** said that the Unionists might feel that they could not sell that to their supporters.

Seamus **Mallon** said that the logic of that argument would be that we are all bluffing and that the political process can not solve the problem and that other parties could go nowhere until the IRA decide to allow Sinn Féin in. He said that the Unionists must realise that if they are seen to be negotiating seriously with the two Governments on the Framework Document that would touch other things off. Otherwise we should all be playing golf or fishing.

John **Hume** commented that it must be remembered that any agreement reached is to be put to the people in the referendum. That would mean an end to Sinn Féin/IRA. That in itself should strengthen the Unionist hand and that was a strong card.

Seamus **Mallon** said that it was indeed a strong card, but the difficulty was that it only came to be played at the very end of the card game. We need now to get the game seriously under way.

The **Tánaiste** emphasised that we are serious. He said that the format of the SDLP's meeting with Trimble would be important, it was vital to get a formulation for dealing with decommissioning. He said that it was important that the SDLP would get briefing from our technical people to help put decommissioning onto the right track. He said Unionists may seek to throw out the loyalist parties next Monday. Agreement to allow movement on the agenda was very important. He said that Trimble could hide behind the decommissioning question and that unless he plays his cards to bypass it and get into negotiations, we will be going nowhere.

Seamus **Mallon** said if **Billy Wright** was killed it would be difficult for the SDLP not to react in the talks. He has worries about the role of the small loyalist parties if negotiations really got under way, that they would leak papers and thus make it difficult to reach agreement. But, nevertheless, it would be disastrous if they were to be pushed out of the talks now.

Joe **Hendron** said on the issue of the split in the UVF and Billy Wright, well informed journalists were saying that he was friendly with the Rev Willie McCrea and had visited the latter's home. He said it would be interesting if this could be proven. He wondered how far the DUP might be tied up with that. He agreed that it was probable that David Ervine in saying that he had no control over it was telling the truth. He said we would have to watch the DUP on this.

John **Hume** said the line to take is that we want to see the talks taking place in a totally peaceful atmosphere - that would be the best way to put it.

Brid **Rodgers** said that Willie McCrea wants the loyalists out of the talks so it would be in their interests for Wright to be killed. She also said that during the march conflict there were threats that policemen would be shot. There was also a worry about how far nationalists now saw a difference between Trimble and Wright.

Prionsias **de Rossa** asked whether there was something that could be done to calm or cool the situation.

Seamus **Mallon** said that policing has to be resolved. There is now a new situation. He said that people would not be as persuadable as they may have been six months ago. Disbandment was no longer just a slogan but was now a real factor in peoples minds. He said that there were some things that could be done. The oath was one. It was not a big thing. He said that the name change was probably more important at least symbolically. It would certainly point the way if the new Chief Constable - Flanagan - would ride with it. There had been some movement in thought in terms of regionalisation - Flanagan sees merit in it - and he thinks that there will be some movement on that. The problem was how to get sectarian populism focused on the political process and the answer to that was to make the political process work effectively. Fair employment was another area. He also commented that this

new **boycott** mentality was lethal because it was dividing communities, and he thought it was quite widespread.

Brid Rodgers said that in her area this boycotting was not organised - but was a reflex action. It was mainly evident amongst middle class Catholics and it was happening against people perceived to be in the Orange Order, especially, those who had manned road blocks at the time of Drumcree.

John Hume said that Derry was fairly calm and fairly positive. He said that the Apprentice Boys showed themselves willing to talk.

The **Tánaiste** asked whether the Apprentice Boys resolve to 'march another time' might cause future problems.

John Hume said that they probably will march later but that it should not be a problem.

The **Taoiseach** asked whether there was anything that could be done on the issue of boycotting? Was it for example happening in Belfast?

Joe Hendron said that it was not happening to the same extent in Belfast.

Brid Rodgers thought that "talking it up" would probably do more damage. She reckoned that it would fade over time.

Eddie McGrady commented that the media were trying to play it up. It would lead to some casualties, but would peter out. He said that it had to be condemned when it was causing inter community strife.

Brid Rodgers made the point that some people feel that boycotting is a legitimate way of protesting. She said that it would be different in situations where it was organised.

Seamus Mallon said that in the last **election** votes for Sinn Féin sent a clear message that people were quite prepared to dispense with constitutional politics, if, at any given moment, the Sinn Féin approach seemed to work better. He said that they had to get the situation back through the political process. It was imperative to show that the talks were moving. He said also that international fund money and other **funding was being used to -'buy communities'**.

The **Tánaiste** and **Seamus Mallon** summed it up that the problem on the ground was that Sinn Féin were being associated with the money which the Governments were obtaining for the communities through various funds and that this money was helping to keep Sinn Féin's political structure going on the ground.

The **Taoiseach** said that the Government will monitor the progress of the talks intensively from here on, now that the initial skirmishing was over. He said the Government would measure progress and assess what needed to be done. It was imperative that movement in the talks should be apparent. He agreed particularly with **Seamus Mallon's** analysis that what we need to do is to show evidence of political movement on the part of the Unionists, the SDLP

and the two Governments to show that the process of constitutional politics was working. He said this was needed so that Sinn Féin could persuade the IRA off the fence. The SDLP's meeting with the Unionists and his Governments with the British would take place with this in mind.

The meeting ended at 12.10.